Cold Prosperity

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The Birch Grove Sleeps

The birch grove slept under a shawl of dusk, its leaves yellowed like old letters, whispering among themselves in a wind that smelled faintly of iron and mildew. Bent and silver-skinned, the trees leaned over the dirt road as if eavesdropping on the approaching rattle of hooves and sleigh bells. A black troika emerged slowly through the mist, hooves sinking into the damp soil, wheels creaking like old bones. Steam curled from the horses' nostrils, catching the last of the light before it vanished behind the trees. The driver hunched low in his coat, his whip silent.

Stepan Mikhailovich Yegorov sat within, swaddled in furs, silent, still, as if carved from coal. His gloved hand rested on a mahogany crate beside him, the surface lacquered, the hinges brass, imported. Inside the box: a mirror, tall as a man, framed in golden wood clawed with carved roses and saints, its surface wrapped in woolen cloth and rope. He had seen it in a shop on Tverskaya Street—absurdly large, out of place among the kettles and clocks. The merchant had said nothing, only named the price. That was enough. He bought it because it was expensive. Not because it was needed.

He closed his eyes as the manor came into view—a white husk of peeling plaster and frost-bitten windows, half-hidden by skeletal trees and a crooked fence long since defeated by moss. A dog barked once, then was quiet. Smoke rose from the chimney in slow spirals, and one could almost believe the place was abandoned, if not for the single candle flickering in the upper window, as if someone had forgotten to extinguish the century.

The troika stopped before the porch. Gleb Andreevich, thin and shivering in a patched coat, stepped forward with a bow so deep it looked like collapse. The driver tossed him the reins. Stepan stepped out without speaking. The air held a bitter taste—damp birch bark, manure, something else. Memory, perhaps.

Behind him, the mirror watched, hidden still beneath its wrappings, waiting for the hall that did not want it.

The front doors moaned as Gleb pushed them open with his shoulder, the lacquered box pressing against his chest, heavier than it had been outside. Inside the manor, the air was dry and sour, like linen left too long in a chest. Cracked plaster scaled the walls in pale flakes. The high ceiling, once painted with saints and cornucopia, now bore the long scars of damp winters. An oil lamp swung on its hook in the entryway, the flame guttering with every step.

“Careful,” Stepan said behind him, voice low, almost tender, which made it worse. “Scratch it, and I’ll scratch your face to match.”

Gleb nodded, his mouth tight. His boots left tracks on the warped floorboards. The mirror’s frame bit into his arms.

From above, the slow creak of floorboards.

On the landing, she stood — Pelageya Ivanovna Yegorova — barefoot, one hand on the bannister, the other resting limp at her side. Her nightgown clung to her like wet paper, thin and spotted with wine or jam or blood. Hard to say in that light. Her long black hair fell over one shoulder, tangled, a ribbon half-unraveled. She said nothing.

Gleb's eyes dropped at once. He did not bow — his arms were full — but he bent his head as if scolded. "I didn't look," he told himself. "I didn't look."

She watched them as they passed beneath her, her gaze not curious, not cruel — just dull, heavy, as if she were watching geese cross a road. The air around her smelled faintly of lavender soap and something older.

"Where shall I put it, barin?" Gleb's voice was hoarse.

Stepan did not answer. He walked ahead through the hall, past a faded portrait of his grandfather in a cavalry coat, past the broken clock that still ticked out of habit. Gleb followed. Behind him, the floor creaked again. Pelageya had vanished.

Only the flickering oil flame remained, dancing against the mirror's shrouded surface.

In the library, the curtains were drawn though the sun had already gone. The air smelled of old paper, pickled herring, and lamp oil. Aleksei Ilyich Shevtsov sat hunched in the corner chair beneath a dusty painting of Saint Jerome, one slipper on, one off, his left foot twitching at intervals as if dreaming of escape.

The bottle on the table was half-empty. The glass beside it had been used only once, then forgotten. He drank from the bottle now.

"This is not how Pushkin lived," he murmured, teeth purpled with wine. "This is not even how his laundress lived."

He reached for the crumpled manuscript pages at his feet, turned them over, then back again. Blank. He laughed once, then drank.

In the yard, Father Pavel walked among the frost-bitten rosebushes, his cassock stiff from wear and damp at the hem. He held a small prayer book in one hand, open to the evening litany, though his eyes were not on the words.

"Forgive them… for they know," he whispered, then fell silent.

The wind tugged at the chapel bell rope. It did not ring, only groaned in the wind like a throat cleared without voice. The priest stopped at the edge of the vegetable plot, knelt slowly, and pressed one hand to the earth.

"Speak louder," he muttered. "I am here. So speak."

A dog barked far off — then another, nearer. The shutters above the east wing banged once, twice, then stilled. Somewhere in the trees, a branch fell with a muffled thud.

Inside, Aleksei poured the rest of the bottle into his glass but did not drink it. He stared at the flame of the lamp instead, eyes wet, mouth slack.

“Tomorrow I’ll write something brilliant. Tomorrow she’ll hear it and know. She’ll look at me the way they once did, back in Petersburg.”

He paused.

“She has beautiful ankles,” he whispered.

The shutters creaked again. The wind pressed against the manor like an old friend asking to come in.

The dining room smelled of burnt duck and melted tallow. The table was set for six, though only four sat. The porcelain plates bore chips along their rims; the silver was dull, the napkins mismatched. Above them, the chandelier’s candles leaned sideways, weeping wax down tarnished arms.

Stepan Mikhailovich sat at the head of the table, his face carved into that smile — tight at the corners, teeth yellow against the red silk of his cravat. He did not blink often.

Pelageya sat across from him, hair damp from a hurried bath, her gown only half-buttoned in the back. She leaned on one elbow, spooning beet soup slowly, eyes glazed. When Aleksei sat beside her, she did not look at him — not at first.

Gleb entered with the duck, his fingers red from heat, one sleeve singed. The bird was blackened at the edges, the smell acrid.

“I—please, forgive, the fire caught…” He set it down too fast. The platter clanged. A pool of fat sloshed onto the lace runner.

Pelageya coughed once, then laughed. Quietly, to herself.

Stepan did not look at Gleb. He cut a piece of duck, chewed it slowly. The smile never changed.

“You have hands, Gleb,” he said finally. “Use them before you lose them.”

“Yes, barin. Thank you, barin.” Gleb bowed. His hand trembled as he poured the wine. Drops stained the cloth like blood.

Aleksei lifted his glass too quickly. Some of it spilled onto his vest. “So sorry, clumsy, as always,” he muttered, dabbing himself with a sleeve already wet from soup.

Under the table, something brushed his wrist. Then fingers — cool, slender. He froze.

Pelageya’s hand lingered a moment too long. Her spoon continued rising and falling, as if nothing had happened.

Aleksei turned red. “That didn’t mean anything,” he thought. “She’s mad. She touches everyone. It’s nothing.”

Her fingers tapped twice — deliberate. Then withdrew.

Stepan chewed slowly. The smile remained, but his eyes flicked once to Aleksei’s face. Then down to his hand. Then back to his plate.

Gleb, silent now, poured his own cup last. His hand shook so badly the wine missed the glass entirely. No one said a word. The candle above him flickered. The duck smoked on its tray.

No one reached for seconds.

The room was cold, but Pelageya didn’t notice. A single candle burned on the vanity, its light catching the dust that clung to the curtain lace like soft mold. The mirror, taller than she was and freshly hung, stood against the wall with the air of something not yet tamed.

She held the lipstick like a dagger, uncapped. Her hand moved slowly, carefully, as if writing to a lover.

“Pelageya,” she whispered aloud, shaping each letter with the curve of her mouth as she drew it. “Pelageya Ivanovna. Madame Yegorova. Mistress of…” She paused. “Of what?”

The wax smeared slightly near the final letter. She frowned, leaned close, and blew warm breath onto the glass. The letters fogged. She wiped it all away with her sleeve in one long stroke, leaving a red smear and a pale reflection.

Then she laughed — a single bark, low in her throat, too old for her face.

She sat on the floor in her nightgown, bare knees pulled to her chest, the lipstick still in hand. “They all think I’m stupid,” she murmured. “They think I don’t see the way they look at me. Gleb afraid, Aleksei sweating, Stepan—ah, Stepan. Always smiling.”

She pressed the lipstick against the floorboard. Drew a circle. Then another.

Below, in his study, Stepan Mikhailovich sat at the heavy oak desk, fingers blackened with ink, a candle guttering beside the ledger. His spectacles slid down his nose. His grin had vanished.

He counted aloud, under breath: “Twelve barrels from the Karpovs… four goats from Truskin… late again… and the Ponomarevs, always sobbing, always poor.” He marked an X beside their name.

He glanced to the corner of the desk where a letter lay unopened — the seal cracked, the wax pale green.

He looked at it. Did not touch it.

The fire hissed in the grate. He scratched behind his ear and opened the next page in the ledger. The smile did not return.

Velvet and Smoke

The Dorogov house stank of cinnamon, varnish, and pride. Every room bristled with effort — red wallpaper patterned with gold vines, chandeliers with too many crystals, portraits of ancestors who'd never existed. Porcelain swans glared from every mantle, every cabinet. One had a cracked beak, mended with lacquer, then gilded over, as if damage were an inheritance worth displaying.

In the drawing room, music played from a phonograph no one knew how to fix — a cracked waltz spinning endlessly through one good speaker. The velvet curtains were drawn back to show windows that hadn't been washed since the frost set in.

Vera Yakovlevna stood before the pier mirror, breath shallow, hands trembling as she adjusted the corset for the third time. It was too tight. The silk bit into her ribs like punishment.

"Beauty must cost something," she whispered. "If it costs nothing, it's not real."

She leaned closer. Her skin shone with powder and sweat. Her curls had wilted again at the temples. She licked her finger and pressed the hair flat.

Behind her, the photographer waited, yawning into his collar. His camera, tall and wooden, watched her like a third presence in the room.

She adjusted her necklace — paste rubies, large as teeth. "Do I look noble?" she asked aloud, though no one answered.

"I could be anyone," she said to her reflection. "A countess. A baroness. A widow of means. No one would dare ask."

The maid knocked softly. "Miss Vera, your papa says to hurry. The light is going."

"I *am* the light," she muttered, pulling on one glove, then the other. "Let them wait."

She turned, her body stiff with the corset's grip, and faced the camera.

"Make me look like someone else," she said to the photographer. "Someone expensive."

Yakov Filippovich Dorogov paced the vestibule like a bull penned in velvet. His coat was too thick for the room, but he wouldn't take it off—its fur trim screamed wealth louder than he ever could. His boots left dark streaks across the polished floorboards, but no one mentioned it.

"Seven kopecks a pood in Yaroslavl!" he bellowed. "Seven! Thieves! Robbers! May their grain rot in the silos and their wives birth worms!"

From the doorway, his wife blinked at him, apron stained with milk. Her hands were raw from washing. "You said six last week," she offered cautiously.

“That was *last week*, woman! Shall I carve it on your stove so you remember?” He threw the ledger onto a side table, knocking over a porcelain shepherdess, which shattered without resistance.

Outside, the boys—his sons, lean and grim—carried sacks of grain to the wagons. No gloves, no boots. Frost clung to their ankles like white chains.

“Faster, you lazy bastards!” Dorogov shouted through the open door. “God gave you bones—use them!”

One boy stumbled. The sack split slightly, and a thin trickle of rye spilled onto the packed dirt. Dorogov inhaled through his teeth.

“Do you know what that costs? Do you? You think I sweat just so you can feed birds?”

The boy didn’t answer. He bent, scooped the spilled grain into his shirt, and hurried on. His feet left little smears of blood in the frost.

Inside, in the kitchen, the air reeked of smoke. The butter had burned. Again.

Dorogov stormed in, tore the pot from the stove, and slammed it down. “What is this? Tar? Poison? Who will eat this, you idiot cow?”

His wife stared at the pot, eyes red but dry. She said nothing.

He pointed to the maid. “Bring wood. Stack it right. And if I see ashes near the flour, I’ll shave your head and send you to work with the pigs.”

The maid nodded, disappeared.

Silence never lasted long in the Dorogov house. It had to be choked, slapped, thrown out like a stray.

The dog barked. A bell rang. A porcelain cup fell without help and shattered. No one picked it up.

Vera sat on the windowsill with her feet tucked under her skirt, arms wrapped in a shawl that smelled faintly of lavender and smoke. The frost on the glass had begun to melt, turning the view outside into wavering ghosts of wagon wheels and children’s footprints. Her fingers were cold, but her eyes were warm with something that flickered like candlelight in a draft.

The maid brought the letter folded once, no envelope, sealed only with a dab of wax. Pale brown — not even red. Vera took it with one hand, unfolded it with the other. Her mouth opened slightly as she read.

“Dinner,” she whispered. “They invite me to dinner.”

She turned the letter over, then back again, as if expecting gold to fall from its folds. The ink was faded, the script uneven — written by a servant, perhaps, or a drunk. Still, her name was spelled correctly. Vera Yakovlevna Dorogova.

“Pelageya wishes for company,” the letter said. “You are cordially expected this Sunday at eight bells. Modest attire. Respectable conduct.”

She laughed once at the last part.

“Modest attire,” she muttered, standing. “I have nothing modest left.”

At her vanity, she pressed the paper to her face and breathed in.

“It smells like dust… like firewood and… old perfume.”

She closed her eyes. “It smells like money that doesn’t have to shout. Like gloves made of silk instead of lies.”

She stood straighter, the letter still against her cheek.

“They want me. She wants me. Or perhaps he. Or perhaps… both.”

She folded the letter carefully, pressed it between two pages of her prayer book, and smiled into the mirror.

“I will bring them laughter,” she whispered. “And they will forget they ever lived without me.”

The church was bitterly cold. Incense curled from a cracked censer, thin as breath, drifting up toward the wooden dome where the painted saints stared with blind, peeling eyes. The congregation sat stiff in their coats, boots muddied, eyes darting like mice caught in candlelight.

Father Pavel stood at the lectern, his cassock heavy with damp at the hem, voice low and even.

“There are icons,” he said, “that shine brighter than gold… and yet carry no holiness. Only the shine. Only the price.”

He coughed once, quietly, into his hand.

“Beware what you kneel before,” he continued. “Some images wear halos, but they bless nothing. They are wood pretending to be light.”

The priest’s fingers trembled as he turned the page.

“The Lord sees not the paint,” he said, “but the eye behind it.”

His voice cracked.

Then came another cough — harder this time. Wet, ragged. He turned away from the congregation, pressing a sleeve to his mouth. A spot of blood bloomed on the cloth, small, bright.

He did not pause. Only closed the book.

“Go in peace.”

He stepped down from the pulpit, his gait slow, as if the floor were unstable beneath his feet.

From the back pew, Elizaveta Afanasyevna Mirova did not rise. She sat perfectly still, gloved hands folded around a wicker basket that rested in her lap. It was tied with a yellow ribbon, the color of weak sunlight. Beneath the cloth cover, there were two loaves of bread, a small jar of preserves, and a clean handkerchief embroidered with lilies.

She had brought it to give. That had been the plan.

Now she simply watched.

“His hands shake more than they did last month,” she thought. “His eyes look deeper into nothing. That cough will kill him soon.”

The basket remained untouched.

She smiled faintly — not with cruelty, but something like patience.

“Soon,” she whispered into her scarf. “Soon, everything will arrange itself.”

She stood, left quietly, the basket still warm in her arms.

The study was dim, lit by a single candle sputtering in its wax cradle. Shadows leaned long across the desk, where Stepan Mikhailovich sat in his fur-lined chair, the ledger pushed aside, an ink blot creeping slowly across his cuff. The room smelled of dried apples, old tobacco, and the vinegar polish the maid used too generously.

He dipped the pen again, then paused, tapping it once against the edge of the inkwell. The letter lay half-written on fine paper—paper he reserved for threats or offers that required dignity.

“To Yakov Filippovich Dorogov,” he muttered. “No. No. Not to him.”

He crossed it out.

“To Vera Yakovlevna Dorogova.”

He smiled.

“You are cordially invited to serve as a guest companion to my wife, Pelageya Ivanovna Yegorova. Your presence is humbly requested for a season—longer, if agreeable. Accommodations and attire will be provided. Your conduct, of course, is assumed to be… unimpeachable.”

He paused, then added with care: “She has been lonely of late. You are to brighten her days.”

He did not sign with affection. Simply *S. M. Yegorov*.

He folded the letter once, tied it with a thin red ribbon, then rang the bell.

Gleb appeared not long after, hair tousled, eyes heavy.

“You’ll take this to town,” Stepan said. “Tonight.”

“It’s late, barin.”

“And so you’ll walk faster.”

Gleb nodded, took the letter, pressed it against his chest for warmth. He didn’t ask for gloves. He knew better.

Outside, the wind had risen. The moon hung low and coppery above the tree line, and frost skinned the road like cracked glass. Gleb pulled his coat tighter, tucked the letter into his inner pocket, and began the walk.

His boots had holes. His stomach was a hollow drum. But he hummed softly as he went — some half-forgotten lullaby from when his mother was still alive.

“She's pretty,” he thought. “The Dorogov girl. Not kind, maybe. But pretty. The kind of pretty you don't need to speak to.”

He passed the churchyard. The frost crunched. His breath came out in clouds.

“Let them all be happy up there,” he muttered, “and let me keep walking.”

Dinner

The dining room at Yegorov Manor had not changed in twenty years. Dust clung like a second skin to every surface. The chandelier above the table drooped with cobwebs and dried candle wax, its arms crooked like old fingers reaching toward plates that never shone. A long mirror leaned in the corner, warped from age, reflecting the light with a dull sickness.

The table was set for five. Mismatched goblets, a cracked tureen, silver so old it no longer remembered its sheen. The air smelled of roast beetroot, vinegar, and wax — the kind of heavy warmth that clung to skin even after you left.

Vera Yakovlevna arrived just past the hour. The knock came sharp, impatient, like a challenge. Gleb opened the door.

She stepped in slowly, deliberately, as if the threshold were made of glass. Her gown was deep violet, thick velvet, stitched with silver thread that caught the candlelight in flashes. Too grand, too tight, too loud for the room — which was exactly how she wanted it.

“Announce me,” she whispered to Gleb without looking at him.

“Yes, miss. Of course, miss.” He bowed low, unsure where to look.

Her perfume followed her into the hall before her voice did — a thick sweetness, like roses pressed into sugar, clinging to the air until it grew oppressive.

Stepan Mikhailovich stood to greet her, arms behind his back, smile already in place. His eyes moved from her boots to her throat, resting a moment on the brooch shaped like a tear.

“You shine,” he said. “The house is brighter for it.”

Vera curtsied slightly, careful not to bend too far. “I feared I might be overdressed.”

He bowed his head. “Only the walls are underdressed.”

From the end of the hall, Pelageya appeared — barefoot, again, in a gown that hung loose from one shoulder. She said nothing.

Vera met her gaze and smiled. “How lovely you look, Madame Yegorova.”

Pelageya tilted her head, eyes glazed. “I was told you’d come in silk. You smell like the theatre.”

Vera only smiled wider.

Behind them, Aleksei coughed into his hand, emerging from the library with his collar askew.

“A supper of saints and sinners,” he murmured. “Only no one knows who plays which.”

Stepan gestured to the table.

“Let us eat,” he said. “Before the duck remembers it used to fly.”

Pelageya sat with one leg tucked beneath her, ignoring the straight-backed chair’s protest. Her bare toes peeped from beneath the hem of her gown, tapping a rhythm only she heard. She leaned her chin on her fist and stared at Vera across the table, unmoving, her eyes narrow and unreadable.

The candles cast flickering light across Vera’s face — all powder and pride — and Pelageya watched her the way a cat watches a bird that’s flown in through an open window: curious, amused, and faintly bored. Her mouth curled slightly at the corner, not quite a smile.

“She blinks too much,” Pelageya thought. “And smells like lilacs stuffed into a coffin. That perfume will outlive her.”

Vera, feeling the gaze but refusing to meet it, busied herself adjusting the napkin in her lap for the third time. She laughed softly at something Stepan said — he had not spoken.

Across the table, Aleksei Ilyich cleared his throat.

“Forgive me,” he said, addressing no one in particular. “But the moment… demands poetry.”

Pelageya raised an eyebrow.

He stood halfway, glass in hand, swaying slightly. “To beauty and decay — sisters, not enemies.”

He took a long sip, then began, voice quavering:

"She came in violet, reeking of myth,
Her laughter gold, her eyes—"

The glass slipped from his hand. Wine splashed across his vest, dripping in thin rivulets down to his lap.

Aleksei stared down at the stain, blinking.

“Well,” he muttered, “that’s the end of that stanza.”

Stepan didn’t laugh. He carved a piece of roast with surgical patience, eyes on the knife.

Vera dabbed at her lip with the corner of her napkin.

Pelageya finally spoke, voice slow, like someone waking from sleep. “You bleed grapes, Aleksei. Perhaps you’re more vineyard than man.”

He smiled sheepishly, still standing, hands now sticky. “Better to be vineyard than barrel, madame.”

“Or cork,” she added, eyes narrowing again at Vera. “So many fine women turn out to be cork.”

No one spoke for a moment.

Then Stepan gestured with his fork. “Please, eat. Even a bad poem deserves meat.”

The meal continued under the thin hum of candlelight and the soft clatter of forks that never quite found their aim. The roast was dry, the turnips mealy, but no one complained — the food wasn’t meant for eating, only for delaying speech.

Stepan leaned back in his chair, the wine untouched before him. His fingers tapped softly against the edge of his plate. His smile had faded to something thinner, thoughtful. He turned toward Vera, his voice low, almost warm.

“Tell me, Vera Yakovlevna… can you read?”

Vera’s hand paused halfway to her mouth. A bit of potato slid from her fork and landed on the tablecloth, unnoticed.

She blinked once, then again. “Of course,” she said quickly. “Of course I can.”

He watched her for a moment, long enough to let her feel it.

“Good,” he said. “Then perhaps you’ll read to my wife in the evenings. Something gentle. Nothing with too many endings.”

Vera nodded once, slowly. “It would be an honor.”

Pelageya, who had not looked up once, began to drag the edge of her spoon along the rim of her plate, making a slow, hollow *clink… clink… clink*.

“Your wife,” Vera said, eyes shifting toward her, “has… unusual taste.”

“She does,” Stepan agreed, not looking at Pelageya. “She prefers silence to story, sleep to sense.”

Pelageya’s spoon stopped. “I prefer not being spoken to like I’m an orphan,” she said, still not raising her eyes. “But we don’t all get what we want.”

Alekséi cleared his throat. “Reading is sacred,” he muttered. “It makes peasants kings. Or at least gives them something to pretend with.”

“Do you read to her?” Vera asked him, not unkindly.

He smiled faintly, eyes on his glass. “She prefers mirrors to books. Easier to lie with.”

Pelageya looked up now, her gaze lazy, sharp. “And you prefer verses no one hears. We’re both liars, Alekséi. Only I wear prettier clothes.”

Stepan tapped the table with his fork.

“This duck is abominable,” he said to no one. “Remind me to beat the cook.”

No one responded.

The candle above them bent slightly as a draft slipped through the old windowpanes. The flame flickered. The chandelier trembled.

The door creaked open with no announcement, just the wind pressing in before her. Elizaveta Afanasyevna stepped into the dining room, tall and composed, with a shawl tight around her shoulders and a wicker basket cradled in her arms. Snowflakes clung to her sleeves like dust she had no time to brush away.

“My apologies,” she said smoothly, as if she hadn’t arrived late but rather by invitation from a different clock. “I was walking in the woods near Vesyegonsk and found these. Quite by chance.”

She placed the basket on the sideboard with care. The cloth pulled back to reveal a neat pile of mushrooms — small, pale, delicate as fingertips. Their scent drifted faintly through the room, earthy and sharp.

“For your table,” she added. “Though I expect your cook has better.”

Pelageya leaned sideways in her chair, blinking slowly at the offering. “Gifts from the forest. How romantic,” she said. “Perhaps next week we’ll dine on bark.”

Elizaveta offered no reaction. Her eyes swept the table — each guest, each plate, each untouched glass. She smiled politely, and it meant nothing.

From the side door, Father Pavel entered without sound. His cassock dragged slightly behind him, wet at the edges from the road. He nodded once to no one in particular, then crossed the room and sat beside Gleb without a word. His breathing was slow, quiet, shallow.

Gleb bowed his head but did not speak. He shifted slightly to make space, though the bench had room enough.

The priest's hands were folded, but not in prayer. He stared at the far wall, at the stain beneath the window where the rain had once found a crack. His eyes were hollow — not tired, not wounded, just emptied of weather.

Elizaveta sat beside Pelageya, carefully smoothing her skirt. "I see you've made a friend," she said, glancing toward Vera.

"She's new," Pelageya murmured. "I haven't decided what she's for yet."

Vera offered a small smile, eyes downcast.

Stepan stood now, holding his goblet.

"Our table is full at last," he said. "A priest, a poet, two beautiful women, a servant, and a mirror." He raised his glass. "What else does one need?"

Pelageya took her spoon and tapped the rim of her glass gently, not enough to break it. "Better wine," she said.

The plates had been cleared, though no one had truly eaten. Only Vera continued to nibble absently at a sugared plum, as though it might tell her something useful. Elizaveta folded her napkin with surgical precision. Gleb stood in the corner behind the chairs, hands clasped, eyes fixed on the fireplace that gave off more smoke than heat.

Stepan Mikhailovich rose slowly, lifting his goblet again. He swirled the wine once before speaking, though his eyes had already claimed the room.

"I've come to a decision," he said. "Something practical. Progressive."

No one interrupted.

"I've purchased the rights to the old church field," he continued. "The western lot. Dead land. Unused. Full of stones and stumps and divine disinterest."

He smiled.

"A distillery will rise there by spring."

There was a pause — not long, but heavy.

Vera blinked twice, then looked to Elizaveta, who remained perfectly still.

Father Pavel neither flinched nor nodded. His fingers, interlaced in his lap, tightened for a moment, then relaxed.

Stepan's smile widened just slightly.

"I know some will object," he went on. "The land is sacred, yes. But what is holiness if it lies fallow? Let the saints share their soil."

Aleksei shifted in his seat. "An interesting metaphor," he murmured.

Pelageya dropped her fork.

It clattered against her plate, loud in the stillness. She didn't reach for it. Instead, she turned her head slowly, eyes fixed on Aleksei.

She didn't speak. She didn't blink.

Her gaze said everything.

"This is your chance."

Aleksei swallowed. His fingers toyed with the stem of his glass.

Stepan turned toward him. "You have something to say, poet?"

Aleksei opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked at Pelageya. Her stare did not soften.

"I'm… merely surprised," he said finally. "Vodka in a church field. It's very Russian."

Stepan chuckled. "Everything here is."

Father Pavel stared down at the table, unmoving.

The candles burned lower. No one reached for dessert.

The Gift of Iron

The wind off the river had turned sharp enough to cut. Frost lay over the ground in dull glass sheets, broken only by hoofprints and cart ruts hardened like scars. Gleb moved quickly through the yard, carrying a bundle of kindling wrapped in rags. His breath came in white bursts, his coat stiff with yesterday's ice.

By the stables, something moved — not the horses. Too small, too still.

He stopped.

There, curled beneath the feed trough, was a boy. Maybe seven. Maybe older — it was hard to tell under the layers of dirt and bruises. His face was blue around the mouth, his fingers raw. One hand was swollen, fingers bent wrong, the skin there like meat left too long in the cold.

Gleb crouched beside him. “Where from?”

The boy’s eyes flickered, then closed again.

Gleb looked toward the manor, then back. He shrugged off his coat and wrapped it around the boy’s shoulders. “You’ll kill me with your silence,” he muttered. “But come on, then.”

Inside the servants’ hall, the hearth glowed faintly. The cook grumbled as Gleb kicked the door shut with his heel.

“You bringing in strays now?” she snapped. “Barin doesn’t feed his own.”

“He’s Dorogov’s,” Gleb said. “Or was.”

That quieted her.

The boy sat on a low stool near the fire, trembling. His injured hand hung uselessly in his lap. Gleb ladled out a bowl of barley soup and held it to the boy’s lips.

The child drank slowly, each swallow like a decision.

“What’s your name?” Gleb asked.

No answer.

“Fine. You’ll be Mouse, then.”

The cook came back with a wool scarf and a crust of bread. She didn’t speak either. She only laid them down and left.

Gleb sat beside the boy, watching the fire.

“Dorogov sends you here half-dead,” he muttered. “What next? Will they send us the bones?”

The boy looked up once. His lips moved.

“What?” Gleb leaned closer.

“Thank you,” the boy whispered, voice thin as thread.

Gleb exhaled slowly. “Don’t thank me. Just eat.”

They sat in the library, late afternoon light leaking through the heavy curtains in thin, bitter stripes. The fire had burned low, giving more smoke than warmth. Books lay open on the table — Pushkin, Baratynsky, Lermontov — their spines cracked, their margins full of faded ink like the memories of someone else's thoughts.

Aleksei Ilyich leaned forward, pointing to a verse with a tremble he pretended was excitement.

“Listen to this,” he said. “‘And in the hush of pale despair, her name bloomed bitter on the air.’ That’s rhythm, Vera. Not decoration — structure. Like bone.”

Vera sat opposite, lips parted slightly, not in awe, but boredom dressed as attention. Her fingers tapped the spine of the book without rhythm. She looked at the words. She did not read them.

“I like the word *bloomed*,” she said at last. “It sounds soft.”

“It is,” he said. “And bitter, here, is not just a taste — it’s a confession. That’s the secret of poetry. The hidden meanings underneath the words.”

She blinked. “But what if the words aren’t hiding anything?”

Aleksei frowned. “Then they aren’t poetry.”

She looked at him then, really looked — not at the book, not at the page, but at the way his fingers trembled as he turned them. At the pale skin beneath his eyes, the uneven line of his collar. Something in her shifted — not sympathy, but opportunity.

“You speak so beautifully,” she said softly. “It’s like a spell.”

He laughed once, bitter and automatic. “The spell ends when the ink dries. No one’s ever fallen in love with a footnote.”

She leaned forward, fingers gliding across the table like dancers afraid of the floor. She reached for his hand, laid her own gently over it, just enough to feel his pulse.

Aleksei flinched, pulled back.

The silence between them cracked.

Not from shame.

Not from decency.

From fear.

Vera said nothing. Her hand remained on the table, palm open, waiting.

He looked at it, then at her.

“Don’t play at kindness,” he whispered. “Not here. It won’t protect you.”

She didn’t move.

“I wasn’t trying to protect myself,” she said.

He stood abruptly, his chair scraping against the floor.

“I have to speak with the barin.”

He left before she could answer.

The poetry book remained open to a page neither of them had read.

Pelageya had moved her bed to the salon, dragging pillows and furs into a nest beneath the cracked windows, as if the bedroom had become too formal a place for forgetting. The room smelled of musk, candle grease, and something faintly sweet — the lingering trace of perfume rubbed into wool. Curtains stayed drawn. The clocks had all been stopped.

She lay curled under sable, a single hand visible, fingers pale against the dark fur. The rest of her might have been stone or snow. Her hair spread over the pillow like ink spilled in sleep.

Each morning she muttered for Gleb — not by name, never aloud. Just a soft rustle, a knock against the wall with her ring. And he came, each time.

He entered quietly, shoulders bowed, a tray balanced with a cup of honeyed vodka, warm and sharp. She never looked at him when he set it down. She only reached, drank, and sighed.

“Too sweet,” she whispered today, eyes still closed.

He didn’t reply. He never did.

She opened her eyes slightly. “You don’t speak much, do you?”

Still nothing.

She smiled faintly. “Good. Too many words ruin the taste of everything.”

She drank again, slower now, the glass leaving a print of her mouth on its rim.

“Do they still eat downstairs?” she asked. “Do they still wear shoes? Do they pretend to care about the weather?”

Gleb stood by the door, holding the tray with both hands. His eyes remained fixed on the floorboards.

“I think I dreamed of wolves last night,” she said. “Or were they horses? Either way, they were running. Away.”

He bowed slightly.

She turned her face back into the pillow. “Come back when the shadows reach the wall.”

He left the room as silently as he had entered.

Behind him, the vodka cooled. The furs shifted slightly as she pulled them tighter around her shoulders. The light did not change.

Elizaveta Afanasyevna appeared in the dining room just after noon, her gloves still on, though the fire was burning well and her cheeks hadn't flushed from cold. She moved with quiet certainty, like someone entering her own home after a long absence. No one had asked her to come.

"I noticed," she said to Gleb, "that the flour deliveries are irregular, and the candles in the servants' wing burn too quickly. Someone is either careless or clever."

Gleb looked up from sweeping ash into the scuttle, startled. He opened his mouth to answer but found nothing worth saying. She patted his shoulder gently.

"It's all right. I'll help."

By evening, she had stationed herself in the blue room with a pencil, three ledgers, and an old abacus that had not been touched since Stepan's mother had gone blind. The books lay open on the table like wounds.

"I can make sense of this," she said to no one in particular. "But I'll need to know who's eating what. And why."

Then came the gifts.

She gave Gleb a wool scarf, hand-stitched in grey and navy. "You're always cold," she said. "And kind."

To the cook, a small sack of rock sugar. "For your tea," she said. "And your temper."

To Aleksei, a coin — an old silver rouble with a hole worn through the center. "For luck," she said. "Or memory."

To Vera, a slice of almond cake wrapped in silk paper. "Because beauty needs sweetness. And so do performances."

Each gift was small, thoughtful, disarming.

Then, as if casually, she began to ask.

"Do you still receive letters, Gleb?"

He nodded. "Sometimes. My cousin. She's in Kostroma."

"May I see them? For the accounting, of course. We must track incoming correspondence."

He hesitated, then handed her the envelope from last week, unopened.

She asked Aleksei next.

"They're mostly unpaid notes," he muttered, rummaging in his jacket. "Nothing of importance."

He gave them to her anyway.

To Vera: “Anything from your father? I’m sure he writes often.”

Vera smiled tightly, reached into the drawer of the writing desk, and produced three letters tied with twine.

“Of course,” she said. “You may read them if you like.”

“I won’t read them,” Elizaveta replied, eyes soft. “I’ll simply… keep track.”

One by one, they let her. They handed over their pages, their dates, their scripts. Not because they trusted her — but because she asked with a kindness so precise, it left no room for refusal.

By nightfall, Elizaveta sat alone by the fire, their letters stacked neatly in her lap, bound with a new red ribbon. The scarf around her own shoulders was old and thin.

She had not given herself a gift.

The shouting began in the kitchen just after the lamps were trimmed for the night. A clang of metal, a pan hitting the floor, the cook’s frightened breath caught in her throat. Gleb froze in the doorway of the servants’ hall, broom still in hand.

Stepan Mikhailovich stood over the cook, one hand gripping her shoulder, the other holding the copper kettle — dented now, its shine dulled. His face was calm, almost thoughtful. Too calm.

“You misplaced it,” he said softly. “Three days. Three.”

“I—I put it on the top shelf, barin… I swear, I—”

He struck her with an open hand, hard enough that her head hit the cupboard door behind her. A jar of pickled beets toppled, shattered on the floor in a purple stain.

She didn’t cry out. Only covered her cheek, nodding quickly, breath sharp through her nose.

“Misplace it again,” he said, “and I’ll misplace *you*.”

He dropped the kettle at her feet. The sound was hollow, final.

Gleb looked down, broom trembling in his hand. The cook caught his eye once — not for help, not for pity — only as witnesses look at each other by accident.

Stepan walked past him without a word, boots leaving beet-stained prints across the floor. He wiped his hand on his coat, then on the wall, as though ridding himself of a thought he no longer needed.

In the drawing room, the fire had burned low. Embers pulsed like dying coals in a forge. Stepan sank into the armchair, boots spread before the hearth, eyes half-closed.

For a long time he said nothing.

Then, quietly, almost tenderly, he began to hum.

The melody was strange — slow, wandering, with no clear beginning. It might have been a lullaby. Or something older. It lingered in the room like a memory that had never belonged there.

Gleb stood outside the doorway, broom still in hand, listening.

The fire crackled. The kettle cooled on the kitchen floor. And Stepan hummed on, eyes unfocused, as though the song were coming from somewhere deep under the snow outside, somewhere only he could hear.

Icons in Ash

The church burned just before dawn.

Not with glory — no tower collapsing, no bell melted in ecstasy — but slow, creeping, deliberate. The north wall caught first, smoke rising in sluggish ropes into the frostbitten sky. Snow melted in black puddles along the chapel steps, hissing as the fire licked through dry beams and hollow eaves.

By the time Gleb saw it from the manor’s upper window, the worst had passed. No one had screamed. No one had come running. It was a quiet ruin, the kind that eats rather than explodes.

When they reached the site, the roof was still whole, though sagging like a sick man's chest. Smoke coiled out through the windows, thick and bitter. Crows circled once, then disappeared. Inside, the icons had blackened, their eyes lost behind soot, their halos smeared into charcoal rings. The faces of saints had blurred into expressions no one could name.

Father Pavel was found kneeling in the nave, where the altar used to stand. Ash covered his cassock, his hands, his face. The prayer book beside him was half-burned, its spine split open like a wound.

He did not look up.

Pelageya stood just inside the doorway, wrapped in a fur cloak she’d dragged over her nightdress, bare feet hidden beneath the hem. Her hair was still damp from sleep. She said nothing.

Gleb approached cautiously. “Father…?”

No answer.

He knelt beside him, reached to touch his shoulder — and stopped.

The priest’s lips moved slightly, dry and cracked.

Gleb leaned closer.

No sound. Just the motion, faint and rhythmic, like the breath of someone not quite alive.

“Did he do it?” Vera asked behind them.

No one answered.

“Or was it meant as a message?” she added, more quietly.

Still, the priest said nothing.

Pelageya stepped forward then, her shadow falling across the blackened floor. She looked down at the man who had buried her mother, married her cousin, heard her confessions when she still believed in sin.

Her voice, when it came, was soft, steady.

“You found your silence, Pavel. Now what will you do with it?”

But he did not look at her.

He did not look at anyone.

He knelt there, ash on his lips, and stared into the embers like a man waiting for something to rise.

By noon, smoke still clung to the chapel’s bones, and the black scent of burned pine rolled down into town with the wind. The frost did not return where the fire had touched. Everything there was soft now — soaked, scorched, uncertain.

Stepan Mikhailovich stood on the steps of the manor, wrapped in his long coat, boots polished, eyes sharp as flint. Below him, two of his men waited beside the wagon, arms crossed, hats low over their brows.

“Find out who did it,” he said. “Someone lit that match. Not lightning, not angels. Someone with fingers and fire.”

The younger of the men shifted. “What if they don’t know anything, barin?”

Stepan looked at him. Not harshly. Not loudly.

“Then make them know.”

The men nodded, mounted the wagon, and rode out.

Inside the servants’ hall, Gleb stood frozen, his knuckles white around the ladle he had been drying. The child — the boy he had found half-frozen by the stables — now sat in the corner beside the kitchen stove, face cleaner, but eyes still like marbles pulled from a grave.

He hadn’t spoken since that first whisper. Not even to Gleb.

Gleb leaned against the wall, watching him.

“They’ll ask questions,” he thought. “And someone will mention him. A boy with no name, no shoes, no papers. Found days ago. Dorogov's? A runaway? An orphan?”

He rubbed his face with both hands, the skin there raw from scrubbing.

“He’s too small to strike a match,” Gleb told himself. “Too weak to climb a window. But that won’t matter. Blame likes small things. Easier to crush.”

The cook entered, wiping her hands on her apron. “Barin’s sending them out,” she said. “Said it plain. No one sleeps until the devil’s named.”

Gleb nodded, staring into the fire. The boy dozed upright, wrapped in a blanket stitched from old clothes, his broken hand still bound.

Gleb stepped forward, slowly, then crouched beside him.

“You didn’t light it,” he whispered. “You wouldn’t. I know.”

The boy said nothing. He didn’t open his eyes.

Outside, hooves struck frost. The wagon rumbled toward town.

Gleb stood and watched the fire, wondering if it was possible to burn without ever touching flame.

The arrangement had not been discussed — not properly. One night, Gleb brought Vera’s trunk to the east wing, and Pelageya said nothing. She merely watched from the window, her back to the mirror, one foot bare on the windowsill, the other wrapped in silk. The second bed remained untouched. Vera slept on the chaise by the hearth, curled in her shawl, her corset loosened just enough to breathe.

They spoke little.

In the morning, Pelageya would rise slowly, stretching like a cat kept indoors too long, her nightgown slipping from one shoulder as if even cloth had grown tired of clinging. She would walk barefoot to the basin, pour the water herself, and press a damp cloth to her face without glancing toward Vera.

Sometimes, Vera watched from the chaise — eyes half-lidded, arms drawn tight around her knees. She never meant to stare, but her gaze lingered too long, tracing the outline of Pelageya’s collarbone, the shadows under her eyes, the red welt where a ribbon had rubbed her skin raw.

In the evenings, when Pelageya undressed by lamplight, Vera would sit at the vanity with a brush in hand, pretending to fix her hair. The mirror offered her two faces — one pale, composed, deliberate; the other soft-edged in lamplight, caught in someone else’s rhythm.

She began to copy things.

The way Pelageya lifted her arm when removing her chemise. The tilt of her head before stepping into slippers. The way her lips parted slightly just before she spoke, even if she didn't.

When she thought no one was watching, Vera stood before the mirror, unbuttoned the top of her blouse, and tried the posture herself — spine arched, shoulder dropped, one hand resting lightly at her hip.

But her eyes in the glass always betrayed her — wide, uncertain, a child in costume.

She blushed and turned away, ashamed without knowing why.

Pelageya, from the bed, never said a word. Sometimes, just before sleep, she would glance toward Vera's shape beneath the blanket and ask, not kindly or cruelly.

"Do you dream in silk, or only lie in it?"

Vera never answered.

And the room would fall silent again, the candle burning low, their breaths slipping into rhythm without ever becoming a conversation.

Aleksei sat at the small writing desk beneath the window, where the panes rattled when the wind shifted. The ink bottle was nearly empty, the nib of the pen worn to a crooked angle that snagged the paper. He had trimmed the candle three times. The wax pooled and cooled, pooled and cooled again.

The letter stretched across four pages, each one covered in narrow, slanted script. His hand cramped, but he wrote without pause, as if spilling something before it thickened and turned.

"Dear Konstantin Fyodorovich, I do not know if you live still — and if you do, whether you recall me, or ever truly did."

A pause. Then more.

"I used to believe words could shape a man, that if you poured enough of them into yourself, something noble would rise from the flood. Now I think words only preserve us — like salt, or vinegar. The rot continues inside, politely embalmed."

He set the pen down, rubbed his fingers, then continued.

"I have not published. The novel sits in a drawer. I call it finished, but only so I may drink without guilt. It is not a novel. It is a grave I climbed into willingly."

Outside, snow fell soundlessly onto the windowsill. He did not notice.

"There is a girl here. Several, in fact. One who recites scripture like she's chewing bread. One who wears silk too loud for these rooms. One who never speaks but turns every silence into a mirror."

He stopped, stared at the ink stain spreading near the corner.

“I am not writing for your answer. I am writing to hear myself again, as I once was — eager, trembling, foolish. Better.”

He signed it: “Aleksei Ilyich Shevtsov.”

He folded it carefully, sealed it with the stub of wax he kept from Petersburg days, the seal cracked, the ring long lost.

Then he held it above the fire — not to burn, only to warm. For a moment, he thought of setting it aflame. But he did not.

He placed it in the bottom drawer of his desk, beneath the rejected poems and unpaid bills. He closed it gently.

“No one reads the dead,” he whispered. “But they still write back.”

He blew out the candle and sat in the dark, listening to the wind speak through the walls like an old teacher clearing his throat.

The sky was bruised violet by the time Pelageya left the manor. She did not wear a cloak. The snow had hardened into a thin crust, breaking softly beneath her bare feet as she stepped over the threshold and into the yard. No one stopped her. The doors closed behind her with a hush, not a slam.

In her hands, wrapped in a yellow linen cloth, she carried a small oval mirror — the kind meant for vanities, for mouths stained with rouge, for glimpses stolen at dusk before going downstairs. Its frame was chipped giltwood, one edge blackened from a candle left too close, once.

She walked slowly, deliberately, across the field toward what remained of the church. Smoke no longer rose from it, but the scent lingered in the frost, sweet and bitter like burned sugar.

Gleb stood by the well, pretending to check the ropes. He saw her cross the yard, the hem of her nightgown stained grey, her breath clouding in soft bursts. He did not move. Only watched.

Pelageya stepped through the broken door of the chapel and stood there a moment, as if letting her eyes adjust not to the dark, but to memory.

Then she knelt.

Her fingers unwrapped the linen with care. She placed the mirror in the ash, face-down, its surface pressed flat against the cold remains of the nave floor.

She sat back on her heels, hands resting in her lap, breathing slow. The wind stirred her hair, and she didn’t smooth it.

Behind her, Gleb leaned against the well, the rope creaking once beneath his hand. He made no sound.

She stayed there for a long while, unmoving, a shape in white among the blackened bones of saints.

And when she rose, she left the mirror where it lay, buried partway in soot, its face hidden from sky, snow, and God.

A Cold Prosperity

The distillery opened beneath a sky that refused to warm. Smoke rose from the chimneys in hard columns, slow and gray, drifting sideways over the frozen fields. The stone walls, still streaked with mortar, stood like teeth against the horizon. Inside, the copper stills gleamed with recent polish, their bellies full of mash that steamed and soured in the low light.

The hired men came from the nearby hamlets — stooped backs, raw hands, boots patched with twine. They arrived before dawn, shivering, silent, blinking against the smoke. No one gave them gloves. They signed no papers. They worked.

Stepan Mikhailovich stood at the far end of the building in a heavy coat with velvet trim, hands clasped behind his back. He watched the men move — hauling grain sacks, stirring vats, coughing in the thick air — and smiled.

“This,” he said aloud to no one, “is what progress looks like.”

A clerk followed close behind, scribbling into a ledger. The pages fluttered with the cold draft that slipped in through the high windows.

“They’ll work for less than soldiers,” Stepan said. “Kopecks. Bread. Cloth at Christmas. What more does a man need, really?”

The clerk nodded without lifting his eyes.

“I call it modern efficiency,” Stepan added, pleased with the phrase. “No idle hands. No parish burdens. They drink what they make, they die where they work, and they don’t bother us in between.”

One of the younger workers — a boy of perhaps fifteen — dropped a sack of rye and winced as the grain split at the seam. The foreman struck him once, quick and flat across the ear. The boy picked up the sack without a word.

Outside, the wind carried the scent of fermented wheat and scorched wood toward the village. Dogs howled once, then fell quiet.

Stepan turned to the clerk. “Make a note — the evening shift begins earlier now. There’s no light to waste.”

He smiled again.

From the far side of the yard, a group of women watched from behind the fence, scarves pulled tight around their faces. None stepped forward.

“Tell them we’ll need washers next week,” Stepan added. “Offer them soap.”

The stills hissed and sighed, and the steam rose without shame.

The letter came folded in a flour sack, the handwriting faint, scrawled in haste. Gleb read it twice before saying anything, lips moving without sound. Then he tucked it into his pocket, wrapped a crust of bread in cloth, and walked to the distillery before the sky had fully lightened.

She was dead. Lena — his cousin, his first playmate, the one who once dared him to steal apples from the Dorogov orchard. Found in a ditch outside Chervinsk, half-frozen, her lips black, the bottle still near her hand. Vodka. Bad kind. Someone else’s cast-off.

No one asked him why he moved slower that day. The men around him moved slowly too. The rye mash soured early, and the steam made their eyes sting. The floor was slick, the wages late, and their breath always smelled faintly of what they could never afford to buy clean.

Gleb stirred the vat with steady arms, his back burning. No one noticed when he wiped his eyes with his sleeve — too much smoke in the air to call it tears.

That evening, as the light drained from the sky like broth from a bone, Father Pavel walked alone up the hill beyond the graveyard wall. He had not been asked. He carried no cross, no book. Only a small bag of soil from the burned chapel, tied in cloth.

The grave was fresh, the mound uneven. No marker yet, just a wooden stake leaning sideways, her name scratched in with the nailhead.

He knelt, set the cloth at the foot of the mound, and pressed his palm to the earth.

“She was a child once,” he whispered. “Someone kissed her hands.”

He coughed then — once, twice, sharp. Then again, until it bent him forward.

His palms caught the soil. When he pulled them back, they were streaked red, the cough wet and broken. He wiped them on his cassock, left the stains to dry.

A wind stirred the trees, brittle branches clicking like old bones.

He didn’t pray. He only sat by the grave until the dark covered him, as if waiting for someone to scold him, or say thank you, or carry him home.

The dress was laid over the back of the chair, half-unbuttoned, as if shed mid-thought. Midnight blue, trimmed in lace, with satin sleeves that caught the light like oil on water. Vera

stood before it for a long while, touching the fabric with two fingers, then holding her breath as she slipped it over her shoulders.

It clung to her differently than it did to Pelageya. Where Pelageya wore it like a second skin, Vera wore it like an answer she didn't understand.

She left the manor without asking, coat draped loosely, the hem of the gown peeking out. Snow clung to her boots in clumps as she walked the dirt road toward town, her steps steady at first, then faster, then slow again.

By the time she passed the smithy, three men had turned to look. Not with contempt — not yet — but with a narrowing of the eyes, a softening of the mouth.

One leaned against a cart wheel, chewing a strip of birch bark. "Morning, princess."

She looked straight ahead.

Another spat near her boot and grinned. "Where's the party? Or just practicing?"

A third only watched, his face blank, hands black with soot. He said nothing, but his eyes held the kind of stillness that unnerves horses.

Vera kept walking. She felt the dress against her thighs with each step, the pressure of their stares behind her like ropes tied around her waist.

"Let them look," she told herself. "They should look. That's what beauty is for."

But her breath came quicker now. Her boots slipped once on the icy stone. The hem snagged on a nail jutting from a fence post and tore with a whisper.

She turned into the alley behind the bakery, heart pounding. There, between the stacked crates and the drippings of the meat shop's gutter, she leaned against the wall and pulled her coat closed with both hands.

"They think I'm her," she thought. "But they don't know who she is."

The wind shifted. Smoke from the distillery rolled down the street like a warning.

Vera waited until her breathing slowed. Then she took the long way home, eyes down, boots heavy, the torn hem trailing behind her like a secret unraveling thread by thread.

The east wing was empty before supper. Snow piled against the windows in soft, blue heaps, muffling the house into a hush. Elizaveta moved through the corridor like someone used to walking where she shouldn't — quiet steps, eyes that measured distance and dust.

In Pelageya's room, the fire had burned low. The mirror was turned to the wall. A comb lay on the floor beside the bed, its teeth snapped.

Elizaveta opened the drawer gently.

Inside, beneath a silk scarf and a folded kerchief stained with rouge, she found the letters.

Seven of them.

Tied with twine, inked in the same slanted hand — Pelageya's. Each envelope bore no stamp, no seal, only the same name written again and again: *Mitya*.

She untied the twine, touched the edge of the first page, then stopped.

Her fingers remained there, resting lightly on the fold.

"Mitya," she whispered, trying the sound in her mouth like a secret she wasn't meant to say.

She did not read.

She stacked them neatly again, tied the twine with the same precision it had been left, and slid them back into the drawer.

Then she crossed the room to the vanity, struck a match, and lit the stub of a candle. Its light flickered against the turned mirror, painting gold into the crack along the frame.

Elizaveta smiled — not kindly, not cruelly.

Only with understanding. As if a knot had been confirmed, not unraveled.

She stood a while longer, watching the flame steady itself, before leaving the room in silence, her shadow folding into the hall like a servant carrying a tray that no one ordered.

The study smelled of ink, old leather, and stale pipe smoke. Aleksei stood just inside the door, hat in hand, shoulders set, though his voice had already begun to betray him.

"I'd like to leave," he said.

Stepan didn't look up right away. He continued scribbling in the margin of a ledger, then dipped his pen again, scratched one more figure.

When he finally raised his head, his smile was immediate, sharp as a nail. "Leave?" he said. "Where to? Some luminous university salon with empty chairs and unpaid poets?"

Aleksei didn't reply.

Stepan leaned back. "You'll find no Lermontov in the fields, Aleksei Ilyich. No poetry in frostbitten toes or rent unpaid. And you're too tired to starve like the rest of your kind."

"I've served your household loyally," Aleksei said, voice low. "Long enough."

"You've written poems no one's read and drunk wine you never paid for." Stepan set the pen aside, folded his hands. "You are not a prisoner. But don't pretend the door was ever locked."

Aleksei stood for a moment longer, then bowed, stiff and bitter.

As he turned to go, Stepan added, not unkindly, “The world will eat you slowly. Here, at least, it swallows you whole.”

That night, the wind howled against the shutter like a thing alive.

Aleksei sat in his room, fire unlit, wrapped in his coat, a bottle by his side. Lermontov’s *Demon* lay open in his lap, the pages heavy with shadow. He read the same stanza three times and didn’t hear it once.

“Wings of fire, chained to earth,” he whispered. “Is that what we are?”

He poured another glass, hands unsteady.

The room blurred around the edges. He blinked hard, tried again.

He pressed his forehead to the pages, breath thick with wine, the words soaked in salt and silence.

No one heard him weep.

What the Bell Tolls For

The sleigh bells rang before the man was seen — wild, uneven, as if horses had been pushed past sense. Snow sprayed at the manor’s front steps, and Dorogov tumbled out, fur-lined coat hanging open, breath steaming, face red with drink before the first cup had been poured.

He laughed as he entered, arms wide, cheeks shining. “You didn’t think I’d come!” he bellowed. “But what is a feast without the man who supplies half your grain and three-quarters of your misfortune?”

Stepan met him in the hall with a tight-lipped smile. “You were due a visit.”

Dorogov clapped his back. “Due and overdue — like my debts, eh? But forget that. Tonight is for meat and merriment, not arithmetic.”

He tossed his hat to Gleb without looking. Snow dripped down the back of his collar; he didn’t flinch. The air around him smelled of sweat, horsehair, and plum brandy.

When Pelageya entered, the room shifted.

She wore green — darker than pine, velvet that drank the lamplight whole. Her hair was loose down one shoulder, her expression unreadable, lips pale as smoke. She stepped lightly, eyes lowered, and said nothing.

Dorogov turned mid-sentence, his gaze catching her like a net thrown wide. The room seemed to quiet a fraction. His smile narrowed.

“Well,” he said, “that’s a fine portrait to hang above any hearth.”

She paused at the threshold, met his stare without a blink, then moved to her place at the table, hands resting lightly on the back of her chair.

Dorogov watched her sit, watched the curve of her spine, the flash of her wrist as she adjusted her napkin.

Stepan poured wine with calm precision.

He did not smile. He did not speak.

He only watched Dorogov's eyes — not where they lingered, but how long.

A servant passed between them with the roast, and the moment folded into noise again. Glasses clinked. Jokes resumed. But the quiet had left its mark. And Stepan's fingers, resting on the table, began to tap. Slow. Even.

Measured.

Vera slipped from the dining room just after the fish was served, slipping past Gleb without a word, her footsteps muffled by the thick carpet in the side hall. Her dress caught on a doorframe as she passed, but she didn't stop to free it properly—only pulled, tore a thread, and kept walking.

She fled not upstairs, but toward the servants' corridor, where the lamps burned low and the walls were close. She stood in the shadow of the linen cupboard, one hand pressed flat to her chest.

"I shouldn't have come down," she whispered. "He was never drunk enough to forget me. Never once."

She closed her eyes and breathed through her mouth, trying not to shake.

The heavy tread of boots echoed down the hall, unhurried, confident.

He had followed the scent.

"Verochka," Dorogov's voice called, too loud for the narrow walls. "Don't sulk. It's a feast! Come, I'll have them bring sweet wine. The good kind."

She said nothing.

A pause. Then the boots again. Turning the corner. He stood before her now, belly first, breath thick with garlic and brandy. His smile widened when he saw her.

"Ah. My daughter-in-absence," he said, voice softening falsely. "Look at you. I send letters. I send carriages. You send silence."

"I live here now," she said, barely audible.

He laughed once, short and dry. "You live nowhere. You borrow places. Like perfume."

“I won’t go,” she said.

That stopped him.

“You won’t?”

She raised her chin, though her hands trembled where they hung at her sides. “I’m not your debt to collect. I’m not a bag of flour to weigh.”

His smile vanished.

“You’ll regret this talk,” he said. “This manner.”

“Not more than I regret coming from your house,” she replied, voice breaking near the end.

For a moment, neither moved. The hallway held its breath.

Dorogov stepped closer. She didn’t flinch.

“You think these people will protect you?” he said. “These ruined gentry with empty pockets and their wife who howls at glass?”

She didn’t answer.

He reached up as if to touch her face. She turned her head sharply. The motion made him pause.

He dropped his hand.

“I’ll return for you,” he said.

She closed her eyes as he walked away. Only after his steps had faded did she sink to the floor, one hand gripping her sleeve to keep it from shaking through the bone.

The feast roared louder as the evening deepened, wine flowing like thawwater, laughter tilting too close to the edge of something sour. Dorogov told stories — crude, embellished, shameless — and every time he raised his voice, Pelageya’s laugh followed, quick and sharp, like glass catching light.

She sat close to him, too close. Her arm brushed his when she reached for the bread. Her eyes lingered a moment too long when he raised his glass. Once, she leaned in to adjust a candlestick and let her hair fall over his wrist like a silken dare.

Dorogov watched her with the greed of a man who believed he was being invited.

Stepan said nothing, refilling his guest’s cup with the careful hand of a man pouring poison that would take hours to work.

When the meal ended and the others wandered into the music room or up to bed, Pelageya disappeared toward the back corridor with slow steps. A servant passed her with a plate of half-eaten pears; she plucked one without asking.

Dorogov followed soon after.

He found her in the green room, where the shutters were closed and the hearth gave off little heat. She stood at the window, back to him, biting into the pear with soft clicks of her teeth.

“Alone at last,” he said, voice thick.

She turned but didn’t step away.

“Have you come to speak,” she said lightly, “or to sweat and stammer like a boy?”

He grinned, stepping forward. “You flirt like a woman who wants answers.”

“No,” she said, licking a drop of juice from her finger. “I flirt like a woman who wants questions.”

He reached for her waist.

She didn’t retreat — not yet.

When his hand found her hip, she tilted her head and looked at him with slow, deliberate calm.

Then slapped him. Hard.

He staggered back half a step, stunned, one hand raised to his cheek.

Pelageya stepped forward now, close enough that her breath touched his ear.

“I know what you are,” she whispered.

His jaw tightened. “Do you?”

“I’ve seen dogs like you,” she murmured. “They piss in corners and call it territory.”

He opened his mouth.

She turned and walked out before he found words.

Behind her, Dorogov stood in the dim green light, one cheek flushed red, and a strange quiet blooming behind his eyes.

Snow had begun again after midnight, falling in the fine, soundless way that coats death and footprints equally. The distillery’s smoke had long faded, and the lamps in the manor burned low, flickering through frosted panes like distant warnings.

Gleb was bringing in firewood when he saw it — a shape slumped near the corner of the carriage shed, half-covered in white. For a moment, he thought it was a broken fence post, or some sack left behind by the workers. But the wind shifted, and he saw the black leather boot.

He dropped the wood and ran.

Aleksei lay face-up, one glove missing, breath shallow. Snow crusted his beard, and the edge of a flask glinted near his hand. His coat was open, as if he'd removed it in delirium. His lips were blue. One eye opened when Gleb shook him — then closed again, as if sight was a burden not worth lifting.

"Fool," Gleb muttered. "Bloody stupid poet."

He hauled him up, one arm around Aleksei's ribs, the other bracing his shoulder. The man sagged like wet cloth, but Gleb was strong and angry enough to carry him.

Inside the servants' hall, he kicked the door open with his boot, laying Aleksei down near the fire where the floor was warmest. Ash stirred in the hearth; Gleb fed it kindling with quick hands.

He pulled off his own coat, thick and wool-lined, and wrapped it around Aleksei's shoulders. The man groaned faintly, tried to speak.

"Hush," Gleb said. "Save your words for a page."

He checked the man's fingers — still pliant, though pale. He rubbed them, cursed under his breath.

Aleksei stirred, eyes fluttering open.

"I saw Pushkin," he whispered.

"You saw the bottom of your bottle," Gleb replied. "He wasn't in there."

A faint smile ghosted across Aleksei's mouth, then vanished.

The fire caught. The light grew.

Gleb sat beside him, arms around his knees, coatless, silent.

Neither spoke again. But between them, warmth began to return — not quickly, not fully — but enough to stay the night.

Father Pavel lay on the infirmary cot brought in from the carriage house, its frame crooked, one wheel broken so it rocked slightly with every breath he took. The room smelled of old wood, wax, and the bitter sweetness of boiled herbs left too long on the stove.

Elizaveta sat beside him, her posture careful, hands folded in her lap, as if keeping vigil beside a ledger.

His face was gray in patches, teeth chattering now and then though the fire was warm. A basin of water rested nearby, blood tinting its rim faintly red where he had coughed into it.

He opened his eyes and stared past her, then slowly found her face.

"I burned it," he said, barely more than breath.

She leaned closer. “What did you say?”

He licked cracked lips. “The church. I set the fire.”

A pause. A single creak from the window’s shutter as the wind shifted.

“To see,” he whispered, “if He’d stop me.”

His fingers clutched at the blanket, then stilled. “No voice. Not even in flame.”

Elizaveta did not speak. Her expression did not change. She reached out and took his hand in hers, thin and papery, fingers speckled with blood.

“You’ll be cold soon,” he muttered.

She held his hand tighter.

“I thought… if it burned, perhaps something would… speak.”

Still, she said nothing.

The fire crackled. The wind whistled faintly beneath the door.

His breath thinned.

And then stopped.

Elizaveta remained where she was, hand still clasped around his, her other hand resting quietly on the edge of the blanket.

She looked down at his face, at the now-still mouth that had uttered thousands of prayers — and one long silence.

Then she leaned forward, closed his eyes gently with her fingers, and whispered something too quiet to hear.

They found him at first light, under the boughs of the old cedar, where the frost had thickened overnight into glassy webs across the branches. He was sitting on the stone bench with his coat thrown open, gloves missing, his head tilted back as if watching birds that had long since fled.

His eyes were open.

His mouth wore a crooked smile, stretched too far on one side, the teeth bared not in pleasure but in something unfinished — surprise, perhaps, or mockery. It did not reach the eyes.

Gleb was first to see him. He stopped short at the edge of the path, one hand still gripping the coal bucket.

He didn’t call out. Just stood there.

The snow around Stepan's boots had melted slightly, then frozen again, capturing the scuff marks where he'd turned, or staggered. One glove was half-buried, fingers curled inward like a dying spider.

Near his feet, the mirror — the one from Moscow, the one he bought for its price, not its shape — lay in pieces across the frost. The frame cracked, the glass veined with fractures. A single shard had lodged upright in the earth, reflecting nothing but the colorless sky.

Pelageya came out barefoot again, sleeves rolled up, hair still wet from washing. She stopped beside the bench and looked at the body a long time.

"That smile," she said. "He never wore it right in life either."

Vera stepped out behind her, hesitated, then approached the shattered mirror. She picked up a piece, turned it over in her palm, and set it down again carefully, like it might whisper if broken further.

Elizaveta knelt beside the body and touched his wrist, though there was no need. Her lips moved in some silent measure.

No one asked what had happened.

He hadn't been ill. There was no wound. But something had caught him.

Or left him.

Later, Aleksei would write it down: *The barin died smiling. But the snow knew better.*

And still, the sun did not rise properly that day. It only hovered, low and pale, as if ashamed to see what it had lit.

They found the fire just before dawn — not in the hearth, but in the copper washtub behind the manor, where the laundry girl had last soaked linens. Smoke curled up in weak threads, smelling not of wood, but ink, glue, and boiled leather.

Inside the tub, charred flakes of paper clung to the rim. Gleb poked at the ashes with the fire iron. A scrap floated free and landed on his sleeve. It read: *Obligations, Dorogov*— before it disintegrated.

The ledgers were gone.

The thick volumes Stepan kept locked in the study drawer, bound in hide and lined with careful columns: who owed, who paid, what land yielded, what man bled. Everything reduced now to a black stew of numbers no longer owed.

That morning, the house was silent. Breakfast uneaten. Chairs pushed askew. One of the hounds paced the hall, confused, whining softly.

By midday, Vera knocked on Pelageya's door. No answer. She knocked again, louder, and entered without waiting.

The room was still. A candle had burned down to the nub on the vanity, wax hardened into the wood like a growth. The bed was made.

Her dress was gone from the hook.

But under the edge of the frame, half-tucked into shadow, were her boots.

Worn leather, fur-lined, laces undone — resting there as if waiting to be stepped into again. As if she had left them intentionally, or forgotten them entirely.

Vera stared at them a long time, then knelt and touched the toe of one, as though it might still be warm.

That night, snow fell again, erasing the prints behind the washtub, blurring the path beyond the stables.

No one saw her leave. No one could say when.

Only the ledgers were gone.

And the boots remained.

The will, if there was one, never surfaced.

The clerk from town came once, rifled through Stepan's drawers with a bored hand, sniffed at the ashes in the tub, and left with a shrug. "No heirs of note," he said. "No claims but debts." He spat in the snow as he mounted his horse. "All of it dust soon enough."

Gleb stood beside the stove that evening, silent. No one told him, but he knew. He had been the one who scrubbed the floors, who buried the dog, who kept the fire alive when the roof leaked. He knew the weight of the house better than its walls did.

Still, when it passed to the creditors, they handed him nothing. Not even a pair of gloves.

So he rose early the next morning, wrapped himself in his patched coat, and walked.

He did not tell anyone where he was going.

Past the burnt chapel, past the field where Dorogov's wagons used to leave ruts in the thaw, past the marker where Lena was buried and already forgotten.

By mid-afternoon, he reached the river.

The Volga rolled slow and heavy, half-iced, the floes drifting in silence, gray on gray. He stood on the bank with his hands deep in his coat, breath trailing out in clouds that did not linger.

He didn't think of jumping.

He didn't think of praying.

He thought of ash and mirrors, of Pelageya's boots, of the child with the broken hand, of the cracked frame in the hall.

Behind him, footsteps in snow.

He turned. Vera.

She wore no hat, just a wool scarf wrapped wrong. Her boots were muddy, the hem of her dress stiff with cold.

She stood beside him, close but not touching. Looked out at the river.

"Nothing left," he said, not bitterly.

She didn't reply.

A long silence passed.

Then she said, "Ice doesn't melt the same way twice. You watch, and it goes. You turn away, and it's already water."

He nodded.

They stayed there until the sun folded into the hills, and the sky took on that silent pink that feels like breath held too long.

Neither moved. The ice drifted.

And still, they did not leave.

The manor did not collapse. It shifted.

Servants stayed. Fires were lit. The distillery smoked again, though fewer hands turned the stills. No great announcement was made, no seal broken and no name posted to the hall. But keys changed pockets. Doors closed differently. Orders no longer came from a man's mouth.

Elizaveta moved through the house as if she always had. Her skirts trailed the same paths Stepan's boots once wore into the floorboards. She took the north room for her own — not the master's chamber, not Pelageya's — something in between, with a view of the back fields where no guests ever walked.

Each morning, she wrote letters.

They filled the old desk in the drawing room, stacked in neat piles, sealed with red wax and the faded crest of a family no longer remembered.

To the tax office in Kostroma. To the grain suppliers. To the bishop who had never replied before.

She wrote them all the same: polite, formal, unwavering.

No one answered. Still, she wrote.

The cook, who once mumbled under her breath and hid burnt onions in the stew, now stood straighter when Elizaveta entered. She measured salt more carefully. She asked permission.

Once, she brought Elizaveta a folded napkin with a monogram stitched in green. “Found in the chest. Thought perhaps…”

Elizaveta nodded, took it without looking. “Very good.”

Gleb, when he passed through the kitchen, noticed how the cook glanced toward the door before speaking. How the broom was never out of place now. How silence followed Elizaveta like a train.

No one named her mistress.

But no one asked who was.

Snow came soft this time, not in gusts but with weight — falling straight, steady, without wind. The trees bowed under it, limbs gently burdened, their shapes lost in white. Nothing moved on the road, and the garden paths were hidden completely, even the crooked line of Gleb’s footprints from the morning gone under.

Inside, no one spoke.

The windows had frosted over in ornate webs, the kind only seen before true cold. Somewhere in the walls, a pipe groaned, then fell silent. The fire in the parlor crackled once, then burned without sound.

Far off — maybe from the edge of the forest, or one of the ruined cottages near the bluff — a dog barked. Just once. A low sound, distant. Then nothing.

Beyond the chapel ruins, behind the scorched stones and the drift where the door used to be, the land had flattened into clean white.

Father Pavel’s grave lay beneath it now. No marker remained; Elizaveta had taken down the crooked stake, quietly, one morning, without remark.

The ground had settled. The mound leveled. Only the snow hinted at any disturbance — a faint rise, a softness underfoot where the rest of the earth held firm.

No one visited anymore.

Not even Elizaveta, though she passed nearby on her morning walks, basket looped over her arm, letters tucked beneath her shawl.

The grave kept its silence.

And the birch trees, tall and silver and still, watched as they always had — without judgment, without memory, letting the snow fall.